

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University
Ohio Mining Journal

Title: The Origin and Results of Miners' Unions

Creators: [Roy, Andrew, 1834-](#)

Issue Date: 15-May-1884

Citation: Ohio Mining Journal, vol. 2, no. 3 (May 15, 1884), 113-120.

URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/32378>

Appears in Collections: [Ohio Mining Journal: Volume 2, no. 3 \(May 15, 1884\)](#)

THE ORIGIN AND RESULTS OF MINERS' UNIONS.

BY ANDREW ROY.

In the feudal ages, like all the laboring classes, the miners were serfs. Whether they ever passed their days and nights in the mines, living and dying there, marrying and giving in marriage, is very questionable, though this is a very common belief. I have met American statesmen and men of science who believed that the British miners of to-day lived underground; that they were born there, and hardly ever came to the surface. Nay, even British statesmen themselves of the present generation thought and publicly taught the same thing. Cobbet once delivered a lecture at New-castle-upon-Tyne in the year 1832, of which the following is an extract: "Here is the most surprising thing in the whole world—thousands of men and thousands of horses continually living underground; children born there, and who sometimes never see the surface at all, though they live to a considerable age." This lecture was delivered in the very heart of the greatest of English coal fields, and within sight of the coal mines. This belief in regard to the subterranean life of the British coal miner doubtless had its origin in the fact that the criminals and prisoners of war of the ancient Romans were condemned to the mines, and lived and died there. Americans can hardly be blamed for entertaining these erroneous views as to the life of the English coal miner when their own statesmen, scholars, divines and scientific men publicly taught the same thing.

It was not until the beginning of the present century that the colliers of Great Britain began to arrest public attention. Previous to the year 1824 combinations among workingmen, having for their object the advancement of wages, were forbidden by law, and were punishable by fines and imprisonment. Though denied the right of organization, labor unions were, however, formed in secret by the miners during the middle or whole of the 18th cen-

tury; and for many years before the repeal of the laws which prohibited combinations, the miners of England, Scotland and Wales had a number of powerful unions, and met and transacted business in disregard of law.

After the overthrow of Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo, a season of unparalleled depression in the coal and iron trades of Great Britain occurred. Nearly every furnace in the United Kingdom went out of blast, and more than half the coal mines were stopped for want of trade. Great suffering resulted among the coal miners, and believing that the government ought to do something in the matter, a mass convention held by the colliers of Staffordshire resolved to make their case known to the government. They formed themselves into three bodies or masses, and having drawn up a petition to be presented to Parliament, a committee of fifty men in each of the three divisions started for London, drawing a wagon loaded with coal along with them. The wagon bore the inscription, "Rather work than beg." They moved at the rate of twelve miles per day, each team taking a different route. Before reaching London, however, they were met by a posse of police officers sent out by the Home Department, who, instead of arresting them, purchased their coal, and advised them to return home; that they had taken the wrong means to obtain redress for their grievances.

For many years after the discovery of the steam engine and its application to the purposes of coal mining, the demand for coal was greatly in excess of the supply. This condition of the market was augmented during the protracted and stormy period of the French revolution. As associations for the advancement of wages were punishable by law, the coal owners continued to pay the lowest wages possible. The miners, however, sought and obtained work at such mines as were the least dangerous and where the coal was easiest mined. The owners at many mines, unwilling to advance wages, yet needing men to meet the growing demand for coal, resorted to the military method of offering bounties to all miners who would engage to work for one year. All the owners followed this example, and for many years the annual hiring and the annual bounty continued in vogue. The sudden and widespread depression of the coal and iron trades which followed the overthrow of Napoleon on the disastrous field of Waterloo brought

the system of bounty hiring to an end. For six or eight years after the return of peace work could not be had at starvation prices at any one of the trades, and riots and blood, the sacking of stores, fights between the mob and police, the calling out of the military and the shooting of starving mobs were the order of the day.

The rapid and powerful organization of labor unions had their origin during these years of depression and tumult. Being contrary to law the unions were all secret; even the place of meeting had to be concealed. But their rapid growth and powerful influence for mischief in the face of the laws of the realm attracted the earnest attention of Parliament, and in the year 1824 all laws prohibiting the organizations of combinations of workingmen were wiped from the English statute books. Then followed a season of bitter and protracted strikes for the redress of deep-rooted grievances and for the advancement of wages. Many of the demands of the miners were just and were backed up by public sentiment. Many other of the demands, though just in the abstract, were such that the employers would not yield, and they preferred to starve the miners into submission. The conflict between capital and labor, submitted to the arbitrament of strikes, which was inaugurated in 1824, has been waged for upward of half a century, and has extended to both sides of the Atlantic, and it would seem that little or no progress has been made toward the final solution of the proper relations of the two interests.

Before the repeal of the laws preventing combinations of workingmen, the miners who were hired for a stated period, were required to sign a bond that they would serve out the time specified, which was usually for twelve months. The practice was for the colliery owner to call a meeting of the miners in the open air, at which the "contract" would be read, and the men called upon to sign it. The miners had no say whatever in its provisions, and were not even allowed to see a copy of the bond before signing, it being deemed sufficient on the part of the mine owners to have the contract read publicly.

One of the provisions of the bond was that any and every corf which was not properly filled—and the mine owners or their agents were the sole judges as to the matter—was to be forfeited, and that any foul coal, such as splint or slate, found in any corf to the amount of four quarts subjected the miner to fine and imprison-

ment. A forfeit of one shilling was also stipulated for every corf of good coals mixed with bottom coals, etc.

In the year 1826 the association of colliers of the rivers Tyne and Wear, which then numbered 4,000 members, took into consideration the above grievances, and presented an appeal to coal owners and viewers at Newcastle, of which the following is an extract: "Suppose a man were to work 25 fortnights in a year, 10 days each, and 12 corves per day, at 6 shillings and 6 pence per score, he would hew (dig) 3,000 corves, for which, on the separation system, he would have to forfeit, according to the rigor of the bond, 3,000 shillings, or 150 pounds. As the amount of his earnings on the above calculation would only be 48 pounds 15 shillings, he would consequently at the end of the year be indebted to his master 101 pounds 5 shillings, beside the loss of his earnings." No such extreme cases ever occurred, although the "master" had the power to put any of his miners in the position stated in the appeal, and such was the law of the realm. The rate of wages was for centuries fixed by law, and the pains and penalties for refusing to comply with the behests of the masters were such as would raise open rebellion in these days. During the reign of Charles II one of the acts of Parliament provided that not working constantly was a great offense to God and to the prejudice of the masters, and miners were required to work six days in the week, and in case of refusal to pay certain fines, and if necessary to suffer other punishments in their bodies.

The miners unions of Germany are the oldest associations of the kind in the world, having originated in the silver mines of the Hartz Mountains more than six hundred years ago, and they now extend over every mining country of continental Europe, receiving corporate rights from government. The system has been perfected in Prussia, and is simply admirable. Every miner, a member of the union, is required by law to contribute $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. of his earnings, and the owner or operator 1 per cent. of the yield of the mine into the benefit fund of the association, and the money thus collected is applied in payment to members during periods of sickness or disability resulting from accidents in the mines, etc., etc.

The members of the union are divided into two classes—permanent members and temporary members. Temporary members only possess personal rights, while permanent members, who become

such after having belonged to the union for five years, have their rights in the association extended to all their family. Members forfeit their rights to any benefit fund, and in fact cease to be longer a member, when they refuse to pay their regular monthly contribution. All the funds of the union are under the control of the inspector of mines, who is responsible for all defalcations, and who is also obliged by law to see that all members are fairly treated. Any miner who belongs to the union, who may be hurt in the mines in the pursuit of his calling, or who may become sick and unable to work from any natural cause, draws pay from the funds of the association during the whole time he is off work, and he also receives medical assistance free of charge. Should accident or disease again prevent a member from working in the mines, or when a member is no longer able to work through old age, he draws a life pension in consequence, and after his death his widow receives a monthly pension till she marries again, and all his children draw pensions until each arrives at the age of fourteen years. When a member is killed in the mines, or dies from any cause, the association pays all funeral expences. There is no compulsion exercised to get members to join; the union is simply and only a benevolent association like the Free Masons or Odd Fellows, except that there is no secrecy about its operations. It partakes in no sense of a trades union organization, associations of this character being, as I have already stated, contrary to law until the year 1866, when the ban was removed forever.

The modern trades unions of Great Britain and the United States of America are established and acknowledged facts, and are becoming more and more a power for good or for evil according as their leaders use intelligent or barbarous forces to control their destiny. The amount of good these unions has accomplished in ameliorating the condition of workingmen in England has challenged the admiration of statesmen and philosophers. According to Judge Rupert Kettle, who has been closely allied with them for many years in the adjustment of wages disputes by boards of conciliation and arbitration, they have promoted free thought and free action among workingmen, and moreover, have taught them to respect the law and rely upon moral means for obtaining what they believe to be right. "We have now," adds the Judge, "no bloodshed, no rioting, scarcely an angry word in the bitterest and most protracted strikes."

In the United States trades Unions are formed in every department of industrial labor. They were brought here by English workingmen, and for that reason have in many cases been looked upon with disfavor as a foreign importation, alien to our institutions. They first began to attract notice about the year 1845, and they have been increasing in number and power ever since, until it may now be said of these leaders, as Gaul Liscus said to Cæsar: "There are some whose influence with the people is very great, who, although private men have more power than magistrates themselves."

For good or for evil these organizations of workingmen have come to stay in this country. It is the duty of statesmen to study these unions and to direct them in proper and legitimate channels, for they are a power capable of as great mischief as they are good results. Like the sting of a bee or the horns of a bull, they may be as they have been, misdirected, and do harm instead of good.

So far as the true interests of the miners are concerned, I have long felt that they have lost immeasurably more than they have gained in their numerous bitter and protracted strikes with their employers on both sides of the Atlantic. The extraordinary and unparalleled demand for coal consequent on the discovery of the propulsion of vessels by steam, the discovery of the manufacture of gas from coal, and the discovery of the hot blast in the manufacture of iron, would have kept wages up to the highest possible point without any resort to strikes. The supply of miners to meet the ever-increasing demand for coal has been furnished by new miners brought to the mines during these senseless strikes. Their additional labor after the termination of the strike made coal plenty and consequently cheap, and so kept wages down. As all know, the way to increase the value of a commodity is to make it scarce.

The organization of labor which sees no redress for grievances except through strikes is an organization calculated to do pure, unmixed mischief, and the sooner it is dissolved the better for everybody, and especially for those whom it was intended to benefit.

The best trades unions in the United States or in the world are those which have the fewest strikes, and because they have the fewest strikes they are the best. The worst are those which have the greatest number of strikes. In those unions where strikes are

fewest intelligence is highest. "Knowledge is power," it respects the rights of capital.

Workingmen who, in seeking the redress of grievances by strikes, add the folly and crime of intimidation and violence, never have nor ever will, as they do not deserve to succeed by such means. No good cause deserves to succeed by this means. In fact it cannot be a good cause, or it is very badly led, which attempts intimidation and violence to redress a grievance, for no condition of affairs can possibly arise in this country affecting the relation of labor and capital which will justify such acts. Obedience to law under all circumstances is the highest duty of an American citizen. If bad laws exist they can be wiped from the statute book. Having the ballot in their own hands, the Congress of the United States and the various State Legislatures which make the laws we are all bound to obey are the servants of the people. Hence all laws are made by the people through their representatives, and to violate a law in seeking redress, the lawless parties, whether miners or citizens in any other walk of life, justly incur public indignation. No matter how just a grievance may be, public opinion and public sympathy will always take sides against the transgressors of law. The outgrowth of lawlessness in a State leads to military oppression; in a trades union it puts a weapon in the hands of employers to oppress labor.

Every miner should endeavor, at whatever sacrifice, to save a little of his earnings every year, if it should be only \$25, and to strive to accumulate property. The possession of property brings respect, and always adds to the comfort and power of intelligent workingmen, besides gaining the esteem of all good citizens. "And now that I have a cow and a horse," says Dr. Franklin, "everybody bids me good morning." It may seem hard to many having large families to maintain to put by anything. But a little self-denial on the part of those the least fortunately situated will enable them to put by something for a rainy day. Three glasses of beer a day amounts to \$54.50 a year; in ten years to \$545, money enough with which to build a comfortable house. This amount saved by ten men would be in ten years, \$5,450; enough money to start a coal bank with. Every successful business man is indebted to his success by saving a little, for as the Scotch proverb says, "Every little makes a mickle." Workingmen are perhaps

not as fully aware of the fact as they should be that the great majority of the successful business men of the United States were originally workingmen, who began life chopping wood, digging coal, driving canal boats, splitting rails, working in machine shops or upon farms.
